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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of speech communication teachers should be to help students learn to analyze and communicate information in interpersonal, group, and public situations--a goal that can be reached only through a mixture of lecture, lecture/discussion, and performance approaches. Although administrators are currently proposing higher student/teacher ratios in response to educational budgetary problems, the exclusive use of the lecture method of teaching fails to help students develop the skills of finding, analyzing, and communicating information. The continuously changing nature of knowledge, the current knowledge explosion in many fields, and the enormous ongoing changes in mass media communications all suggest that the educated person should not merely store knowledge but should learn how to find and use knowledge. Performance-based approaches to speech communication education provide an understanding of the real problems of analyzing and communicating aesthetic knowledge and are thus valuable and necessary. To combat the academic forces that call for higher student/teacher ratios, speech communication teachers must define their programs in terms of benefits to students and must stand their ground in defense of performance. (GT)

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IN DEFENSE OF PERFORMANCE

MALCOLM O. SILLARS

There are three factors on the current scene which will have a significant effect on education in the next five to ten years. First of all there are only eight states in the nation which will experience an increase in high school graduates between now and 1995. Only two, by the way, Texas and Louisiana are in the South. Most of those with a gain are in sparcely populated states like Nevada, Utah and Wyoming.

Second, double digit inflation won't show much decline for another five years, at the least. Third, the feeling among taxpayers that they need to have taxes cut does not appear to be abating. Though the rest of the nation doesn't show the wild extremes of my former home, California, it is worth noting that they are considering a constitutional limit on income tax which will cut state spending for higher education by as much as one-third. And everyone expects it to pass.

Put these three together and they spell trouble right here in River City. Declining or stable enrollments, so, no pressure to expand higher education. Continued inflation, so, no increases mean anything in real dollars. And citizen pressure to cut taxes. With few exceptions, we are in, at the very best, a no-growth cycle. And while my experience causes me to refer to higher education those of you in secondary education know that the problems are there also.

It is in just such a period when unimaginative administrators go to the optometrist to make sure their eyesight is good, sharpen their pencils and memorize mystical incantations like SCH and FTE. And that most magic of all: Student/Faculty Ratio.

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Malcolm O. Sillars

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

It is part of my foolish nature to challenge even the most powerful of dogmatic forces. Hence my title "In Defense of Performance." And perhaps I even fit your theme a little "The South as Scene" because you have probably been better defenders of performance than many of the rest of us.

One of the reasons why I dare challenge this powerful mystical force is that I have been to the temple of administration, seen the priests and analyzed their Bible.

It is true that their ideal, freshman biology, can be taught to 1,000 students at a time with an instructor, four machine scored tests and a large room. But is that all there is to education? No, the University if it is really to train biologists requires laboratories, slides, microscopes, lab assistants and a computer to score those tests. What about Sociology then. Sociologists don't need a lab or expensive equipment, you say. Well, they do seem to have been successful, in many places, in defining the discipline to meet the requirements of the Student/Faculty Ratio religion but, I would argue, at the expense of the student's practical knowledge and ability to communicate in written or oral form.

Communication, English and Languages are the principal victims of the dogma. Because we insist that students should learn to communicate we have always had among the lowest Student/Faculty Ratios.

I would like to avoid convincing you that I am some mindless opponent of the lecture method of teaching or some vague exponent of a communication program which is all public speaking and oral interpretation. But I would like to encourage you to look at your program and define it on grounds which consider the benefits to students and not simply adaptation to the system.

But then even those of you who agree may be saying "But why are you telling this to us? Go Tell our Deans." Because we teachers of communication need to be reminded from time to time. Why? Because we are lured by the pragmatics of the situation and also by our own egos. There is something attractive in listening to ourselves talk. There is something attractive in having a hundred or so students take notes while we dispense wisdom. And there is something dull in listening to inept speeches, discussions and oral readings, and in reading and correcting less than adequate analysis and prose. And the discussion method seems an awfully inefficient way to dispense knowledge, at times.

When I was a freshman in College the father of a friend of mine, a very successful lawyer said to me: "There are two things you learn from an education: How to find information and how to use it." That may seem like an oversimplification but it is not. It focuses on skills: How to find and how to use. In other words we teach people to analyze and to communicate.

To become an educated person a student must have knowledge, but what is knowledge? Is it some unchanging thing which you store away in hopes of getting on Tic Tac Dough? Knowledge is not static, it is changing. When I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa, American Public Address was a study of the speeches of great men. The approach was neo-Aristotelian (though we hadn't heard that term yet). The persons we looked at were mostly American politicians or preachers: Johnathan Edwards, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt. They were also all men and, with the exception of Booker T. Washington, they were all white.

What a change we have today when Cal Logue from Georgia does a fine study of the reconstruction ridicule of blacks. When a recent analysis I have completed of movement studies reveals that a majority have to do with outgroups: Blacks, women, student revolt, gays and lesbians.

When courses we teach have titles like "The Rhetoric of the Women's Movement," "The Rhetoric of War and Peace," "The Rhetoric of Social Reform."

When I was in graduate school at Iowa E.C. Mabie was having some graduate students in theater do audience analysis studies using a crude audience analyzer and here and there around the nation behavioral research was creeping in ever so slowly. Today it is a major part of what we do.

And to show you how fast things move. I have always thought that my historical-critical approach to communication was the traditional mode of analysis. I was shocked the other day when a graduate student, who is now into discourse analysis, said to me about Jim McCroskey's work, "He's still doing that traditional stuff."

Yes, what we call knowledge is continually changing and some things wane and then return. As the field moves from logical positivist assumptions toward relativist ones, historical-critical insights seem more useful and I have the impression that if I stand still long enough you will all get back to where I am!

It's not true, of course, because historical-critical scholarship has also undergone a revolution in approach and content.

Furthermore, we are going through a knowledge explosion, even in our field. I see it every summer when I get some breathing room and find a large stack of unread journals waiting for me. Every time some colleague mentions Structuralism or Habermas or Speech Act Theory I realize that I have not kept up on everything I should - nor can I.

And we, above all others should be aware of the enormous change coming over the field of communication through media. The satellite, cable TV, VTR's, Video disks and a host of other factors are fast changing us into Marshall McLuhan's global village. We are in what, when I was in graduate school, could only have been conceived of as a Buck Rogers world.

Thus, the educated person does not store knowledge but learns how to find what he or she needs. And do I need to convince you that the other half of the formula is correct? The educated person must be able to communicate important and useful knowledge. I think not.

This reality about education that it must teach us how to find and use knowledge is paramount. It should be our primary goal. That goal seems an obvious objective for the high schools whose graduates go out to jobs or on to college. It seems obvious also for our majors who go into Law or politics or business where knowledge of organizational communication or interpersonal communication or argument will have to be adopted to new and changing professional scenes.

But it also applies to graduate students. A few weeks ago I was listening to a discussion by some faculty members about one of their best graduate students, an empirical researcher, who was having trouble with his dissertation. Finally, one colleague said, "you know what his problem is? He doesn't know how to make an argument." That set us to thinking. Most of our faculty began in the field as high school or undergraduate debaters. My guess is that this is true of many of us here in this room.

Many of us also participated in theater or oral interpretation regardless of what our emphasis might now be and an understanding of the real problems of analyzing and communicating aesthetic knowledge has not left us. So, even though we recite Shakespeare only after 1:00 AM at parties we do have a sense about the limits of purely scientific attempts to understand communication.

Despite the outside financial and demographic problems which we face we do have a public factor on our side. Business men, professional schools and community leaders are more aware these days that students cannot communicate adequately. And they are calling on the schools and colleges to do something about it. Sometimes, this is a kind of a mindless attention to the mechanics of grammar and spelling or the simplistic oral skill of using the telephone but it is something we can exploit against the equally mindless dogma of student/faculty ratio.

If we are to exploit it we must first put our own house in order. We must see our primary goal to be helping students to learn to analyze and communicate in interpersonal, group, and public situations. We must help them to understand the media which increasingly affects their lives. We must teach them to analyze audiences, make arguments and appreciate aesthetic excellence. And we must devise our curriculum with a balance of learning todays version of what is essential knowledge and learning the skills of discovery and communication.

Our teaching strategies must be mixed to accomplish these curricular goals. And we must take care to choose, lecture, lecture discussion or performance approaches in order to achieve a particular goal. Academicians are sometimes foolish in this. They will insist that a course must have no more than twenty-five or thirty students and then lecture to them. It is clear that we frequently have not thought out our positions, devised reasonable solutions and defended our positions. We have all too frequently complained to one another when the academic high priests incanted away our integrity. Only when we know what we are about will we be able to combat the academic myth-makers. Therefore, my call today is to define our position, stand our ground, in defense of performance.